



# The Admonishment



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## Chapter 1 by Robert Coyle

"Subject 1424561, please report to Central Processing for your admonishment," droned the lifeless voice of the intercom, silencing the muffled hush of the cafeteria.

I am Subject 1424561. I committed a major breach in the regulations that I am forced to live under, for I am a brigand; a thief; a common criminal.

My crime? Let me explain.

It happened in a moment: We were all in line, waiting for our meals. She was there, in front of me. I had seen her multiple times on the ship. We've exchanged glances previously. I waited daily with budding impatience for those glances. I would plan my every action to make sure we reached the line at the exact same moment each day. She would enter the line first - delicate, perfect, yet intense. I would follow, and maintain a six inch gap between us, or the exact length of my hand from the end of my palm to the tip of my index finger. I'd deftly check each time to make sure the distance was the same.

Today began just as any other of the past 132 days had progressed, except for today, immediately following the 133rd time I had checked my distance from her with my hand, index finger extended, I thought I saw the hint of a smile form in the corner of her mouth, appearing briefly but immediately vanishing behind the stiffening of her upper lip. I froze as she moved ahead in line. The expression of emotion towards someone else who is not in a populous-sanctioned relationship with you was strictly forbidden. If her smile had been captured by the

over watching cameras she would be punished. Possibly severely. The idea excited me greatly.

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in the small of her back. She let out an almost inaudible inhale of breathe from her tightly pursed lips and her body slightly shifted and turned towards me. Her hand still was positioned on the corner of her tray. With energy pulsating out of my very being, I placed my hand on top of hers, our fingers brushing against each other for mere milliseconds. A smile crept across my face.

Immediately I knew I had made a grave mistake.

Her face grew grave and ashen. She ripped her hand away suddenly, knocking over her fork which clattered down to the floor, her hand returning to the side of her leg, fingers rigidly pointing straight down. The nearby food attendant grabbed my wrist and instantaneously, instinctively, I tried to pull away, but it was too late.

Now, looking back on the event, I tried to be circumspect with my thoughts because I knew I, like everyone on this ship, was being monitored - my every thought commandeered, transcribed, and analyzed. But they already knew. Everyone knew. Everyone always knew everything. And now I would be punished.

It was such a cumbersome process, the admonishment. For every transgression came the same routine: first, the declaring of the breach of regulations to the disciplinary panel by the accused; second, the period of silent self-reflection as you wait for the processing of the verdict; and finally, as the votes were automatically tallied by the viewing populous and then double-checked for accuracy by the panel, the punishment would be announced and immediately carried out on the closed-circuit feed for all to watch in baited anticipation.

Minor transgressions brought minor admonishments: a week without food, the tattooing of the transgression on the back or arms of the accused, the cleaning of debris from the living compartments (a particularly humiliating punishment since only the lowly did such things)...

But major transgressions brought major admonishments. Frankly, there were hardly ever any major transgressions but a few had transpired in recent memory. A young boy had stolen a

piece of fruit and his palm had been branded, the searing heat crippling his fingers and leaving his hand useless. An old woman had been assigned tasks and she had been left to starve in her locked room for several days, and the tension had been riveting.

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This, too, was a major transgression and I knew it. I silently wondered in terrified anticipation what it would be: Would my hand be cut off? Would my eyes be pierced? Would I be put in solitary confinement for the remainder of my time?

I waited, my emotions in a frenzied deadlock. What would my punishment be? I needed to know. My very being burned with anticipation. When...would...they...tell...me??!!

As if in answer to my silent, stifled pleading, the gentle vibrating crescendo of the nearby metallic chimes alerted me that the panel's verdict had been submitted for broadcast. My wait was finally over. The hint of a smile crept towards the corners of my lips and I prepared for my fate...

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